

St. Louis Post Dispatch Editorial

The best way to reduce the number of abortions performed here and abroad is to reduce the number of unintended and high-risk pregnancies. The best way to accomplish that — and to reduce the spread of sexually transmitted diseases — is to make contraceptives more widely available.

That's the goal of a bill narrowly approved last week by the House of Representatives. But effective solutions sometimes fall victim to politics. President George W. Bush has said if the Senate passes the bill in its present form, he will veto it.

The provision on contraceptives is part of a larger funding bill for the U.S. State Department, including the foreign aid programs it oversees. It would lift an existing ban on providing contraceptive aid to foreign organizations that also provide or promote abortion.

A different measure addressing contraceptives overseas has been introduced by Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis. Now before a House committee, the bill would double the amount of foreign aid allotted for condom distribution in developing nations. That aid, about \$75 million in the current budget, plays an important role in slowing the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

One of Mr. Bush's signature initiatives, and one the most admirable achievements of his presidency, is a \$15 billion fund to fight AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean. When he announced his plan in 2003, however, Mr. Bush insisted that one-third of the money spent on prevention had to be earmarked for programs and groups that promote sexual abstinence.

There is no disputing that sexually transmitted diseases can not be transmitted without sexual activity. Nor is there any argument that sex is a prerequisite to pregnancy. Thus, abstinence from sexual activity is the only foolproof way to prevent AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies.

But limiting funds to abstinence-only programs is not a pragmatic approach, especially in parts of the developing world where husbands spend months at a time working far from home.

When funding for his AIDS plan stalled in Congress, Mr. Bush wisely pushed a compromise that allowed groups that promote or perform abortions to compete for some prevention grants. Mr. Bush would be equally wise to adopt the same approach to the recently passed House bill.

But the politics of the situation are dicey. Members of the pro-life movement are a key part of Mr. Bush's support base, and his deft use of abortion politics has been a key part of his appeal.

The pro-lifers back the abortion-related conditions on foreign aid, which first were instituted by President Ronald Reagan in 1984. They were rescinded by President Bill Clinton before being reinstated by Mr. Bush in 2001.

Study after study has found that contraceptives are a crucial element in improving women's health and economic status. They allow women to control the timing and spacing of their pregnancies.

The House provision on contraceptives does not try to change the existing bans on federal funding for abortion here or abroad. Providing money for more contraceptives and allowing more groups to distribute them simply are pragmatic steps that will reduce the need for abortions. That's a goal everyone can agree on.

© Copyright 2007, The St. Louis Post Dispatch